

Quesnay and Physiocracy

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QUESNAY AND PHYSIOCRACY

BY THOMAS P. NEILL

The Physiocrats were a group of eighteenth-century social philosophers whose theories have been as grievously misinterpreted as the thought of any group in history.¹ They lived through that period of intellectual, social and moral ferment known as the "Intellectual Revolution," an age when Lockean psychology and the Newtonian scientific method were struggling to replace Cartesian rationalism. It was a confusing age intellectually, and consequently it is not surprising to find in the Physiocrats mixed, but not integrated, elements of Cartesian rationalism, Lockean empiricism, Newtonian science and deistic optimism.² These newer modes of thought were grafted onto the older tradition, which seems to have survived in France longer and with greater strength than historians have been accustomed to admit.³ The Physiocrats are almost always treated, then, as having written the first chapter in contemporary economic thought rather than the last chapter in earlier modern thought; they have been dealt with incorrectly simply as

¹ There seems agreement on this point today. No one has done anything either to challenge or to make invalid the charge made in 1931 by Norman J. Ware when he observed: "There is no body of economic theory more misunderstood than that of the Physiocrats" ("The Physiocrats: A Study in Economic Rationalization," *The American Economic Review*, XII, 607).

² Students of physiocracy have failed to realize that in such an age of transition one almost always finds such mixed, and often conflicting, elements. They tend to identify physiocracy with one or the other of the prevailing systems. Charles Bourthoumieux, for example, insists: "Sans doute ils ont une méthode presque purement déductive et a prioristique" (*Le mythe de l'ordre naturel en économie politique depuis Quesnay* [Paris, 1935], 31). On the other hand, John Arthur Maurant claims: "All the Physiocrats are insistent upon the need of a scientific method based on observation and experimentation" (*The Physiocratic Conception of Natural Law* [dissertation submitted to Chicago University in 1940, printed in 1943] 18).

³ The historian today who is insistent on the gradualness of change is surprised to find only two or three commentators on physiocracy who have seen in the system any elements surviving from preceding ages. Louis de Loménie, *Les Mirabeau: Nouvelles études sur la société française au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1879), is the outstanding exception in the nineteenth century. In more recent times Max Beer, *An Inquiry Into Physiocracy* (London, 1939), offers what he considers the first new interpretation of physiocracy since Adam Smith. Beer shows the close similarity between medieval economic thought and that of the Physiocrats, and he attempts to establish a causal relationship to explain that similarity.

predecessors of Adam Smith and Jean-Baptiste Say, who are supposed to have developed and modified physiocratic theories and thus launched the ship of classical economic theory.

I

The Physiocrats, prominent for a brief span of fifteen years in the "Age of Enlightenment," were a group centering around François Quesnay, physician to Madame de Pompadour. At about the age of sixty Quesnay turned to economic problems, publishing his article *Fermiers* in the *Encyclopédie* in 1756. For the next twelve years he wrote many articles on economics, gathered around himself a group of ardent followers, and succeeded in having them popularize his ideas throughout the learned circles of France. His first important convert was Marquis de Mirabeau, who became the most voluminous popularizer of Quesnay's ideas.⁴ Soon others gathered around Quesnay, the outstanding of whom were the Abbé Nicholas Baudeau, Pierre Samuel Du Pont, Guillaume-François le Trosne and Pierre-Paul le Mercier de la Rivière.

No member of this group made any pretention to originality; each professed only to be popularizing Quesnay's ideas. They frankly looked upon him as their master,⁵ and their sole occupation was to repeat and to amplify his laconic statements. Mirabeau was the first, and the least successful,⁶ popularizer of Quesnay's theories. At the latter's suggestion and partly under his direction in

⁴ This is Victor de Riquetti, the elder Mirabeau, of course, father of the more famous Honoré-Gabriel, Comte de Mirabeau, of revolutionary renown. The elder Mirabeau left forty published volumes, 400 quartos in manuscript, contributions to various journals totaling many volumes, and an immense correspondence, exchanging over 4000 letters with his brother alone.

⁵ The Physiocrats constantly referred to Quesnay as *notre maître* and *notre père*. They frequently called him "the Confucius of Europe"; more often they called him the "modern Socrates," and they liked to compare themselves to the young men who gathered about Socrates to snatch pearls of wisdom as they fell from his lips and then to pass them on to mankind. This relationship is best expressed in Mirabeau's *Éloge funèbre*, printed in Auguste Oncken (ed.), *Oeuvres économiques et philosophiques de F. Quesnay* (Paris, 1888) .

⁶ Mirabeau was not a good writer. He was wearisomely repetitious and annoyingly verbose—a fact which he seems to have appreciated himself. He described his most famous work, *L'Ami des hommes*, for example as "un chaos d'idées & de détails, qui n'ont d'ordre que dans les Titres des Chapitres . . . inégal, sans goût, négligé, souvent diffus, & amphibologique . . . fatigué & étouffé" (*L'Ami des hommes*, fourth edition [Hamburg, 1758], II, 425-426).

1766 he wrote his *Philosophie rurale*, which Grimm referred to as "the Pentateuch of the group."⁷ When it was evident that this work had failed to accomplish its purpose of assembling all the physiocratic theories into a systematized body of doctrine, Quesnay and Mirabeau encouraged Le Mercier de la Rivière to write his *L'Ordre naturel et essentiel des sociétés politiques* in the next year. This work was taken by the Physiocrats and their opponents alike as the definitive statement of physiocracy.⁸ Meanwhile, the group had secured the use of Baudeau's periodical, *Éphémérides du citoyen*, to serve as the official organ of their thought. In 1768 Du Pont began the publication of the official collection of physiocratic writings in a six-volume work entitled *Physiocratie*.⁹ It was about this time that the Physiocrats reached the peak of their influence; by 1772 the *Éphémérides* discontinued publication, old Quesnay had lost interest in social problems and had turned to geometry, Baudeau and Du Pont had accepted positions in Poland, Le Mercier and Le Trosne were busily occupied with their professional work at law. Mirabeau alone continued to elaborate on physiocratic theories, but his effusive writing tended rather to rebuff the reader than to attract him. In these fifteen years, nevertheless, the Physiocrats had attracted the attention of intellectuals and of crowned heads throughout Europe;¹⁰ their theories were discussed everywhere, and some attempts were made to put them into practice.

⁷ Baron de Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique* (Paris, 1813), Pt. I, Vol. V (February, 1766), 481.

⁸ Du Pont stated the official physiocratic viewpoint when he referred to it as a "sublime book" in which the "truths discovered by Dr. Quesnay are so superiorly and so clearly developed" (*Physiocratie*, edited by Du Pont [Paris, 1768-1769], III, 15. Du Pont himself, at Diderot's urging, wrote a condensation of Le Mercier's *L'Ordre naturel*, "*De l'origine et du progrès d'une science nouvelle*," which he put into *Physiocratie*).

⁹ The first two volumes of this work consist of articles written by Quesnay for the *Journal de l'agriculture, du commerce et des finances* and for the *Éphémérides du citoyen*; the other four volumes consist of selections chiefly from Baudeau, Le Trosne and Du Pont.

¹⁰ "Statesmen, ambassadors, and a whole galaxy of royal personages, including the Margrave of Baden, who attempted to apply their doctrines in his own realm, the Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany, the Emperor Joseph II of Austria, Catherine, the famous Empress of Russia, Stanislaus, King of Poland, and Gustavus III of Sweden, were numbered among their auditors" (Charles Gide and Charles Rist, *A History of Economic Doctrine* [translated from revised edition of 1913 by R. Richards, London, no date], 5).

II

Since the historians who turned seriously to a study of physiocratic theory attempted to link it up with the French Revolution, as well as with the beginnings of classical nineteenth-century economic theory, it is not surprising that the Physiocrats should have been read out of the context in which they wrote. The misunderstanding of physiocratic theory which developed in the nineteenth century resulted partly from the very nature of physiocracy, which was an all-embracing social system about equivalent to politics in the Aristotelian sense of the term. Thus it became possible for almost any social theorist with an axe to grind to find what he was looking for in physiocratic writings and to ignore the rest.¹¹

But this misunderstanding is mostly the result of a curious combination of events which seems to have conspired against a correct knowledge of physiocratic theory. Within two decades the Physiocrats, so prominent for a few years, fell into oblivion and then into complete obscurity. Turgot's failure to improve conditions in France during his brief ministry (1774-1776) spelled ruin for physiocratic doctrine in France, for Turgot had been popularly identified as a Physiocrat,¹² and he sought to apply much of

¹¹ Proudhon, for example, saw in their *impôt unique* a utopian scheme of taxation, and he considered the Physiocrats "our first economists, whose theory of taxation on ground rent has the honor of being the first utopia proposed in over a century" (*Théorie de l'impôt* [Paris, 1851], 288). Proudhon ignored everything in physiocracy except the *impôt unique*. Louis Blanc, again, considered them important for having helped promote the French Revolution; but he charged them with being proponents of bourgeois individualism rather than fraternity, claiming their whole system could be summed up in the maxim *laissez-faire, laissez-passer*. See his *Histoire de la révolution française* (Paris, 1847), 515-531. Most students of the history of economic thought claim that the Physiocrats constructed the first systematic body of economic theory, and they almost all take the point of view stated by Lewis H. Haney when he observed that they were men "having a mission to perform in the development of the economic thought of the world" (*History of Economic Thought* [New York, 1936], 205). But there are some who do not take so simple a point of view. Pellegrino Rossi believed that "for them economics was only a chapter of social organization" (*Cours d'économie politique* [Brussels, 1851], I, 21). And Louis de Loménie characterizes them as "a bundle of contradictions." They created a vast synthesis, he thought, "which attempts to regulate the moral, social, political and even international order." But "this synthesis is at once obscure, chimerical and incoherent" (*op. cit.*, II, 282).

¹² Turgot attended physiocratic meetings and agreed with them on most points of theory, but he refused to be identified with any group. He was, as a matter of fact, more a follower of Vincent Gournay than of Quesnay.

the group's theory as a remedy for France's economic ills. Opponents of physiocracy used his failure as proof that the system had been tried and found wanting, and there was no Physiocrat on hand to defend the system successfully.

The triumph in the French Revolution of the political ideas of Montesquieu and of Rousseau, against both of whom the Physiocrats had pressed home relentless attacks, further discredited their system. Their political ideal of a benevolent despotism seemed linked to an age forever left behind, whereas their economic theories seemed to serve as a point of departure for Adam Smith and the later "Radical" English economists. Their ethical theories, which for the Physiocrats lay at the basis of all their social thinking, also seemed antiquated to later nineteenth-century social theorists who adopted the method and the criteria of positivism and utilitarianism. Thus only those physiocratic theories which dealt directly with economic problems survived as pertinent material for nineteenth-century social thinkers.

But even more disastrous for a correct understanding of physiocratic theory was the appearance in 1776 of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, whose faint praise damned physiocratic economic doctrine to the limbo of forgotten theory for over half a century.¹³ As the triumph of Montesquieu's and Rousseau's theories discredited physiocratic political ideas, so the triumph of Smith's and his followers' economic theories discredited those of the Physiocrats. For Smith's approach was new and it fitted in with the needs of a rising industrial economy, whereas the Physiocrats laid their stress on agriculture. It was through Smith almost exclusively that the Physiocrats were known to the English-speaking world,¹⁴ and Smith did not afford his readers a true picture of physiocracy.¹⁵

¹³ Auguste Oncken concludes his analysis of Smith's distortion of physiocratic doctrine in these words: "Le grand prestige dont cet ouvrage [the *Wealth of Nations*] a joui jusque bien avant dans notre siècle et qui n'a commencé à décliner que depuis une époque relativement peu éloignée, faisait considérer à tous les disciples de Smith comme un sacrilège de vouer une attention sérieuse à un système que la maître condamnait" (*op. cit.*, xiii).

¹⁴ Henry George is typical. He dedicated his *Protection and Free Trade* "To the memory of those illustrious Frenchmen of a century ago, Quesnay, Turgot [who was not a Physiocrat], Mirabeau, Condorcet [not a Physiocrat], Dupont, and their fellows, who, in the night of despotism, foresaw the glories of the coming day." Elsewhere George confessed: "I am acquainted with the doctrines of Quesnay and his disciples only at second hand through the medium of the English writers" (*Progress and Poverty* [New York, The Modern Library, 1938], 424).

¹⁵ Apart from the general bent of Smith's interpretation, questioned by Max

The chief cause for the misunderstanding of physiocratic theory, however, is to be found in the triumph of the positivistic method in the social sciences in the first half of the nineteenth century and the creation of economics as an independent science. This change is observable to some extent in the work of Adam Smith, and to a larger extent in that of Jean-Baptiste Say, both of whom defined economics as the science of wealth. Both looked upon the Physiocrats as their intellectual fathers, but the surviving Physiocrats hastened to repudiate both children. Du Pont, for example, hastened to write to Say after reading the latter's *Cours complet d'économie politique* to complain that Say was no follower of the Physiocrats. "You have narrowed the scope of economics too much," he protested, "in treating it only as the science of wealth. It is *la science du droit naturel* applied, as it should be, to civilized society."¹⁶

Beer in his *Inquiry Into Physiocracy*, Smith made several specific capital errors in his explanation of physiocracy. In the first place, Smith failed to understand what the Physiocrats meant by the word *stérile* when they used it in reference to all classes except agriculturists. This misunderstanding hurt the Physiocrats more than any other single point among later historians of economic thought. Smith was of the opinion that Physiocrats wanted perfect equality, as well as perfect liberty and perfect justice. (*Wealth of Nations* [Everyman's Edition, 1910], II, 163-164). But nothing was further from their minds. Again, in what purports to be an adequate examination of the physiocratic system, Smith makes no mention of the *impôt unique*, which is as bad as outlining the *Wealth of Nations* without mentioning Smith's theory of value. If Smith was as familiar with physiocratic writings as it is generally believed he was, it is difficult to see how he could have dismissed Quesnay's political speculation by observing that "Mr. Quesnai, who was himself a physician, and a very speculative physician, seems to have entertained a notion of the same kind concerning the political body" (*ibid.*, 459). Nor could he have referred to Le Mercier's two-volume treatise as "a little book" containing "the most distinct and best connected account of this doctrine" (*ibid.*, 464).

¹⁶ This statement was made in a letter written by Du Pont from aboard the "Fingal" on April 22, 1815. It is printed in the seventh edition of Say's *Cours complet* (Brussels, 1844), 582. This letter of Du Pont's is valuable for showing his attitude toward Adam Smith's followers. "Votre génie est vaste," he wrote to Say: "ne l'emprisonnez pas dans les idées et la langue des Anglais, peuple sordide de qui croit qu'un homme ne vaut que par l'argent dont il dispose; qui désigne la chose publique par le mot *commune richesse* (*Common-wealth*), comme s'il n'y avait rien de tel que la morale, la justice, le droit des gens, dont le nom n'est pas encore, entré dans leur langue. Ils parlent de leurs plaines, de leurs montagnes, de leurs rivières, de leurs ports, de leurs côtes, de leur *contrée* (*country*); ils n'ont pas encore dit qu'ils eussent une *patrie*."

The view of Smith and Say prevailed, of course, and when Eugène Daire rescued the Physiocrats from obscurity by publishing a collection of their works he included only those which fell within the purview of economics as a science of wealth. The others were dropped as "a very confused assembly of dissertations holding at once to the moral order, the political order and the material interests of society."¹⁷ Daire's collection and commentary did not pass without protest. In the *Journal des économistes* of 1847 Passy attacked Daire for isolating physiocratic economics from the rest of the system. "What assures first place to Dr. Quesnay," Passy maintained, "is that he brought to his contemporaries a complete social philosophy of which economics was only the principal emanation, and that this philosophy rested on ideas which, without having all the charm of novelty, had never been presented before with such order, clarity and completeness."¹⁸

Daire defended himself in two subsequent issues of the *Journal des économistes* by analyzing the teachings of the physiocratic school.¹⁹ The first of his nine chapters was an altogether inadequate and erroneous survey of their *philosophie générale*, and the other eight chapters were devoted to their economic doctrines. He was answered again, this time in an article by Henri Baudrillart which offered the last balanced description of physiocracy for almost a century. "The principal merit of Dr. Quesnay," Baudrillart insisted, "is his affirming the reality and the sanctity of natural law."²⁰ The author attempted to analyze the philosophical principles of physiocracy and to show their harmony with its economic doctrines.

But Daire's estimate of physiocracy prevailed, and from his day it has been treated almost exclusively as though it fitted within the science-of-wealth definition of economics. Daire's collection, in-

¹⁷ Eugène Daire (ed.), *Physiocrates* (Paris, 1846), 436. This statement is made in reference to the first twenty-six chapters of Le Mercier's *L'Ordre naturel*, but Daire could have said it of any physiocratic writing. Of Le Trosne's three important works, as another example, Daire included only the *Intérêt social*, which deals with Le Trosne's specifically economic doctrines. His *L'Ordre social*, his most important work, which includes his social, political and moral theories, is no more than mentioned in Daire's introductory article.

¹⁸ H. Passy, "De l'école des physiocrates," *Journal des économistes*, XVII (June, 1847), 231.

¹⁹ Eugène Daire, "Mémoire de M. Eugène Daire sur la doctrine des physiocrates," *ibid.*, XVII (July, 1847), 349-375, and XVIII (September, 1847), 113-140.

²⁰ H. Baudrillart, "La philosophie des physiocrates," *ibid.*, XXIX (May, 1851), 4.

deed, remained the principal source of information on physiocracy until late in the nineteenth century. Typical of the mid-nineteenth century view of the Physiocrats is that of Léonce de Lavergne who, after having devoted fifty-two pages to Quesnay's writings on purely economic subjects, mentions casually in the last paragraph: "Quesnay was also interested in metaphysics; he had written the article *Évidence* for the *Encyclopédie*."²¹

In 1888 Auguste Oncken brought out his *Oeuvres économiques et philosophiques de F. Quesnay*, which replaced Daire as the most authoritative and most complete collection of Quesnay's writings. Oncken approached much nearer a correct estimate of the Physiocrats than had Daire, but he read them as a late nineteenth-century economist and considered them merely the founders of "the first strictly scientific system of economics."²² Oncken failed, as the other economists of his time did, to judge the Physiocrats in the light of the tradition to which they were heirs; instead he evaluated them in the light of their successors in the history of economic thought.

This same criticism is to be levelled against the principal French authority of the time, Gustave Schelle,²³ and his successor, Georges Weulersse,²⁴ the latest pre-eminent authority on the Physiocrats. Weulersse, on whom most students rely today for an evaluation of the Physiocrats, believes that their philosophical principles are determined by their economics and that their economic thought is essentially capitalistic.

²¹ Léonce de Lavergne, *Les économistes français du dix-huitième siècle* (Paris, 1870), 111.

²² Auguste Oncken, *op. cit.*, ix.

²³ Schelle's principal works are: *Le Docteur Quesnay, chirurgien, médecin de Madame de Pompadour et Louis XV, physiocrate* (Paris, 1907); *Du Pont de Nemours et l'école physiocratique* (Paris, 1888); *Turgot* (Paris, 1909); *Vincent de Gournay: laissez-faire, laissez-passer* (Paris, 1897). Schelle also edited Quesnay's article *Impôts*, originally written for the *Encyclopédie*. It appeared in the *Revue d'histoire des doctrines économiques et sociales*, I (1908), 137-186.

²⁴ Weulersse's principal works on the Physiocrats are: *Le mouvement physiocratique en France*, 2 vols., (Paris, 1910); *Les manuscrits économiques de François Quesnay et du Marquis de Mirabeau aux archives nationales (M. 778 à M. 785)* (Paris, 1910); "Les physiocrates sous le ministère de Turgot," *Revue d'histoire économique et sociale*, XIII (1925), 314-337; "Sully et Colbert jugés par les physiocrates," *ibid.*, X (1922), 234-251; "Le mouvement pre-physiocratique en France, 1743-1755," *ibid.*, XIX (1931), 244-272. Weulersse wrote the articles on the various Physiocrats for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*.

Until recently the only account in English of the Physiocrats was the small and very inadequate book of Henry Higgs,²⁵ which contributed nothing to the findings of Oncken, Schelle and Weulersse. There were also a number of articles on various aspects of their thought,²⁶ and more recently there appeared Mario Einaudi's *The Physiocratic Doctrine of Judicial Control*. Einaudi does well in showing how the physiocratic ideal of legal despotism had been grossly misunderstood and in analyzing the checks they proposed to put on their despot. But he accepts the conclusion that "their system of natural order was removed from the metaphysical abstraction of the systems of natural law prevailing in the two preceding centuries,"²⁷ and he believes that all physiocratic doctrine flows from the *Tableau économique*, "the key which opens the door to a correct interpretation of the whole."²⁸

In 1939 Max Beer published his provocative and revolutionary little book, *An Inquiry Into Physiocracy*, which he insists is the first departure from Adam Smith's estimate of the Physiocrats.²⁹ Beer shows the parallels between medieval economic thought and that of the Physiocrats and comes to the conclusion that "all the difficulties and incongruities met with in the study of Physiocracy would be removed if we considered it as an attempt to rationalize medieval economic life in the light of the progress of philosophy and physical science since the sixteenth century."³⁰ Beer's departure from the estimate made by Smith and his followers is in the right direction. He judges the Physiocrats, however, simply as economists whose theories were strikingly similar to those of Aristotle and the medieval tradition. He makes no attempt to discover what place eco-

²⁵ Henry Higgs, *The Physiocrats* (London, 1897).

²⁶ The most important articles in English on the Physiocrats are: Norman J. Ware, "The Physiocrats: A Study in Economic Rationalization," *American Economic Review*, XXI (1931), 607-619; Arthur J. Bloomfield, "The Foreign Trade Doctrines of the Physiocrats," *ibid.*, XXVIII (1938), 716-735; Thorstein Veblen, "The Preconceptions of Economic Science," *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, XIII (1899), 121-151; O. H. Taylor, "Economics and the Idea of Natural Law," *ibid.*, XLIV (1929), 1-39; "Economics and the Idea of *Jus Naturale*," *ibid.*, XLIV (1930), 205-241; Stephan Bauer, "Quesnay's *Tableau Économique*," *Economic Journal*, V (1895), 1-21.

²⁷ Mario Einaudi, *The Physiocratic Doctrine of Judicial Control* (Cambridge, 1938), 20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁹ Max Beer, *An Inquiry Into Physiocracy* (London, 1939), 189.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

nomics occupied in the physiocratic system or to determine the relation of so-called economic laws to the natural law about which both medieval economists and the Physiocrats wrote so much.³¹

Beer comes closer to a correct understanding of physiocratic economic doctrines than anyone since their day, but he does not fill the need voiced by Laski when the latter complained: "A full study of the political ideas, and especially of their conception of natural law, is badly needed."³² Such a study is attempted by John Arthur Moursant's *The Physiocratic Conception of Natural Law*. This study, however, is inadequate.³³

III

The historian who would pass sound judgment on the Physiocrats must read their writings in the light of what they knew rather than in the light of what followed physiocratic theorizing. He must discover what were the sources of their thought, and he must find how they reacted to the environment in which they lived and which they hoped to reform. Only then can he come close to knowing what they meant by what they said. It is the old problem, so often stated but all too often disregarded by historians, of not reading a subsequent mentality into the object under investigation.

The Physiocrats looked on a France where decline from the glorious reign of Louis XIV was everywhere noticeable. The war of the Spanish succession had been only a draw, at best, for France; and the war of the Austrian succession had been a complete failure,

³¹ Beer does have a chapter on "The Economics of the Law of Nature," but in it he merely indicates the similarity between physiocratic and medieval doctrines on exchange, traffic and price. Beer concludes the chapter thus: "To sum up this chapter in a single sentence: The physiocrats accepted the universalist outlook from the Stoics and Christianity; the views on agriculture, exchange, price and traffic from Aristotle and Aquinas; and the reasonings of Locke on property and the rise of civil society to protect life, liberty, and property" (*op. cit.*, 72).

³² Harold J. Laski, *The Rise of Liberalism* (New York, 1936), 319.

³³ Moursant arrives at conclusions that would amaze anyone who has read the Physiocrats. He asserts, in the face of all authority and of the writings of Le Mercier, Du Pont, Le Trosne and Mirabeau (see pp. 17-19) that the Physiocrats wanted a scientific system based on experiment and observation. Moursant apparently did not read much of Quesnay, for he asserts that the Physiocrats "reduce man to an animal level, to a creature consisting entirely of physical desires" (*op. cit.*, 23). Quesnay had labored to prove the freedom of the will and the immortality of the soul and to show how man participates in natural law freely and intelligently, rather than blindly like animals.

as the Seven Years' War was to be. Suffering from misery and near-bankruptcy largely resulting from these wars caused Frenchmen to inquire into the cause of France's weakness; and English success in these same wars invited them to look across the Channel to study the causes of English strength. Voltaire and Montesquieu were only doing the normal thing when they crossed the Channel to study English society and English thought.

Eighteenth-century France was an agricultural country that had not yet freed itself from feudal restraints. Most holdings were small; intensive agriculture was unknown; antiquated methods were still in use, and the combination of small holdings and feudal obligations practically precluded France's adopting the improvements effected by the "agricultural revolution" in England. It was when agriculture was in its sorriest plight that Quesnay lived in the country and was confronted with the obstacles to reform. It was, moreover, when the results of England's "agricultural revolution" were attracting attention. The Physiocrats were anxious to remove all obstacles to a similar revolution in French agriculture. France was a nation, moreover, where trade was impeded by thousands of internal tolls and barriers. It is against these especially that the Physiocrats will direct their arguments for freedom of trade.

The Physiocrats wrote in a period when discussion on economic questions was *à la mode*.³⁴ France's ills seemed to be chiefly economic, and the journals were filled with discussions of these ills and with proposed remedies. Indeed, a number of new journals were established, and licenced by the government, for the express purpose of carrying articles on economic and financial subjects.³⁵ But there had not yet been formed any independent science of economics. Lavergne puts the situation well when he observes that "the word *économie politique* was known; many writers used it, both in

³⁴ Grimm condemns the Physiocrats for trying to monopolize the subject. "Depuis que l'économie politique est devenue en France la science à la mode, il s'est formé une secte qui a voulu dominer dans cette partie" (*op. cit.*, Pt. I, Vol. V, [February, 1766], 480).

³⁵ Most prominent among these were the *Gazette du commerce, d'agriculture et des finances*, established in 1763, the prospectus of which announced that it had been given the exclusive privilege of treating economic subjects for thirty years. In 1765, however, the *Journal de l'agriculture, du commerce et des finances* was established to supplement the *Gazette*, which was to limit itself to practical subjects, whereas the *Journal* was to specialize in theoretical discussions.

France and abroad, but it did not yet stand for any clearly fixed idea.”³⁶

Economics was still considered a branch of politics or of ethics, depending on whether the author set about treating it practically or normatively. Rousseau, for example, who wrote the article *Économie politique* for the *Encyclopédie*, wrote an essay in political philosophy. Only occasionally did he direct his attention to economic questions, and these were always viewed as questions of governmental policy. This, of course, was in keeping both with the older Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition and with mercantilism. Aristotle’s discussion of economic questions is to be found in the first part of his *Politics* and scattered through various parts of the *Ethics*; the Schoolmen treated economics as a branch of ethics, and the mercantilists looked upon economic questions as part of the science of statecraft.

The Physiocrats called themselves *philosophes économistes*, and they looked upon their system as a social philosophy embracing what today would be included in economics, politics, sociology and ethics. It was a normative social science which they based on natural law, as the word *physiocratie* indicates. Du Pont defines the subject in the sub-title of his *Physiocratie* as *Constitution naturelle du gouvernement plus avantageux au genre humain*, and within the approved collection of physiocratic writings is the assertion that “the science of economics is nothing but the application of the natural order of government to society.”³⁷ In his *Discours de l’éditeur*, in which he sums up physiocratic doctrine, Du Pont wrote that physiocracy “sets forth with certitude the natural rights of man, the natural order of society, and the natural laws which are most advantageous to men assembled in society.”³⁸

Quesnay indicates that economics, politics and sociology should all be part of social philosophy when he describes the arrangement in China, that country which was supposed to come closest to the ideal order of the Physiocrats. Quesnay tells how the Chinese have their U-King, which corresponds to the Christians’ Bible or the Mohammedans’ Koran. But the U-King approaches perfection because it governs all of man’s social relations, be they political, economic or religious.

³⁶ Lavergne, *op. cit.*, 65.

³⁷ “De l’utilité des discussions économiques,” *Physiocratie*, IV, 9.

³⁸ “Discours de l’éditeur,” *ibid.*, I, ii-iii.

These sacred books [of U-King] include a complete *ensemble* of religion and the government of the empire, of civil and political laws; both are dictated irrevocably by the natural law, the study of which is very searching and is, indeed, the capital object of the sovereign and scholars charged with the details of administration. Thus everything in the government of this empire is as permanent as the unchangeable, general and fundamental law on which it is rigorously and wisely established.³⁹

Abbé Baudeau entitled the work in which he attempted to summarize the entire physiocratic system *Introduction à la philosophie économique*. His *résumé général* includes the three principles on which this economic philosophy is based, after which Baudeau states, “*Voilà le droit naturel et la philosophie morale.*”⁴⁰ This study, he insists, can be perfected only by “*l’instruction morale économique*, that is to say, instruction in the natural law of justice in its essence.”⁴¹

When Du Pont collected the writings that would form a complete synthesis of physiocracy, he placed Quesnay’s *Le droit naturel* first as a summary of the primary principles on which the science was based. This was the first article, incidentally, that he published in the *Journal de l’agriculture, du commerce et des finances* when he took over the editorship of that periodical in 1765. By way of introduction to the article, Du Pont sought to point out the relationship which economics bears toward philosophy in the physiocratic system:

We have said in our preface: a knowledge of order and of the natural and physical laws should serve as the basis of economics. We cannot repeat this too often to our readers, because this great, fundamental truth, seen with all its consequences, clears away all popular prejudices and all captious reasoning that false contrivances and unrestrained interests have introduced into a science where error is so dangerous. And with a little reflection one can see with certitude that the sovereign laws of nature include the essential principles of the economic order . . . Here, then, is the solid base on which the edifice should be erected: we hope never to lose sight of the fundamental truths established there.⁴²

Du Pont tried vainly in the days after the French Revolution to keep these “fundamental truths” before the public as “a solid base” on which to erect the science of economics. It is in defense

³⁹ Quesnay, “Despotisme de la Chine,” in Oncken, *op. cit.*, 605.

⁴⁰ In Daire (ed.), *Physiocrates*, 819.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 820.

⁴² Quoted in Oncken, *op. cit.*, 362-363.

of the older physiocratic view and against the newer concept of economics as "the science of wealth" that he wrote to Jean-Baptiste Say:

How is it that you have not seen that all the sciences and all the morality of economics are there [in physiocracy]? Why have you attempted to split this science in two in order to separate the science of wealth, which is only a collection of calculations, from that of the developments appropriate for showing the utility of conforming to the law? The latter was, always has been and always will be everything within the law, which cannot be violated without injustice, without tyranny, without crime.⁴³

Economics for Du Pont, then, was a moral and normative science, "the science of natural justice applied, as it should be, to civilized society."⁴⁴ This is the very meaning of the term *économie politique* as understood in France at the time, Du Pont tells Say. He accuses the latter of not writing French when he tries to include all political affairs under the term *la politique* which is "the science of Machiavelli, of Cardinal Richelieu, of Bonaparte. But *l'économie politique* is that of justice clarified in all its internal and external social relations."⁴⁵

IV

The Physiocrats were agreed on the scope of physiocracy, and for a time they seemed in agreement on what they meant by "natural law" and "the natural order." But it is evident to anyone who reads their works closely that there are important differences between Quesnay and the younger Physiocrats who were supposed to be his disciples.⁴⁶ There are indications that at least Quesnay, and perhaps some of his disciples also, realized these differences,

⁴³ "Correspondance de Du Pont de Nemours avec J.-B. Say," in Daire, *op. cit.*, 396.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Contemporaries, it is true, all regarded the Physiocrats as a *secte*, a term which was reproachfully hurled at them. Linguet speaks of the Physiocrats as "l'ordre des Frères de la doctrine économique . . . c'est un ordre nouveau, fondé, aux environs de 1760, sous le nom de *Frères économistes*, par le père Ques . . ." (quoted by Joseph Garnier, "Physiocrates," *Dictionnaire de l'économie politique* [Paris, 1854], II, 361). The Physiocrats themselves believed that they were a school like that of Confucius or that of Socrates, and they looked upon themselves as united against the Sophists of the eighteenth century. But the fact remains that the younger Physiocrats, who sought to popularize Quesnay and to develop his theories, deviated from his teaching farther than they realized. This, of course, is a common occurrence in the history of ideas.

for he began to grow lukewarm in later years. His last writing on an economic subject was early in 1768, shortly after the publication of Le Mercier's *L'Ordre naturel*; after that time he withdrew from the school and concentrated on geometry. Though Quesnay makes no explicit statement to that effect, there is reason for believing that he had come to realize that his disciples were not faithful followers of his doctrine and his methodology.⁴⁷ And it is probably more than mere coincidence that the articles *Intérêt de l'argent*, *Impôts* and *Hommes*, which he had given to Du Pont, were never published by the energetic young Physiocrat.⁴⁸

The criticism that the Physiocrats were Cartesian in method and therefore that their science would be barren of new discoveries when once completed⁴⁹ can be made with some justice against Le Mercier and most of the younger members of the school. The *Éphémérides* went so far as explicitly to condemn the inductive method advocated by Beccaria:

We can know these sciences [the moral, political and economic sciences comprising physiocracy] in their full extent, because their fundamental principles are evident by nature to those of us who wish to reflect a bit—and sometimes even despite ourselves. By applying ourselves to a thorough knowledge of these principles and always taking them as our point of departure, we arrive easily and with the greatest certitude at their remotest conclusions: an invincibly clear logic conducts us there rapidly by a series of incontestable deductions.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ The only commentator on physiocracy who seems aware of this point is Auguste Oncken, who makes this observation: "Nous ne pouvons, en somme, reconnaître avoir acquis la persuasion que Quesnay ait été complètement et par conséquent justement compris d'aucun de ses disciples. Diverses observations nous font même arriver à la conclusion que Quesnay, surtout vers la fin de sa vie, a eu aussi le même sentiment" (*op. cit.*, 721).

⁴⁸ There was also a personal reason for this rift. Quesnay had wanted to place the *Éphémérides* under the protection of the dauphin; Mirabeau and the other Physiocrats opposed such a move. Quesnay, who lived and moved in the court circle without being involved in court intrigue, was desirous of winning the dauphin over to his views. But none of his associates agreed with this policy. It should be noted, too, that Quesnay showed only a passing, though absorbing, interest in economics. He had originally done notable work in medicine, then in philosophy, and then he turned to economics at the age of sixty. Finally he devoted his full energies to geometry after passing the age of seventy.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Jerome Mille, *Un Physiocrate oublié* (Paris, 1905), 306; Edgard Allix, "Le physicisme des physiocrates," *Revue d'économie politique*, XXV (1911), 563; Charles Bourthoumieux, *op. cit.*, 31.

⁵⁰ *Éphémérides du citoyen* (1769), VI, 62.

In the same organ Mirabeau had a year before explicitly compared his method of arriving at truth with that of Montesquieu and arrived at the conclusion that the two had nothing in common. "We neither follow the same plan nor adhere to the same doctrine. He considers established laws, following the political views of governments. My principles remain higher; for I consider nature herself, or the constitutive essence of the laws, preserved from all arbitrariness and all human fraud."⁵¹

Le Mercier is even more insistent on following the deductive method. "I do not look at any nation or any country in particular," he states; "I seek to describe things as they should be essentially without concerning myself with what they are or what they have been in any country whatsoever."⁵² And again he insists: "Since truth exists by itself and is the same in all places and at all times, we can arrive at it, and at all the practical consequences which result from it, by reasoning and examination alone. Examples which appear to contradict these consequences prove nothing; they only show that men have lost the way and have not arrived at certitude and at a full knowledge of the truth."⁵³ In one of his later works Le Mercier puts his contention thus: "In order to establish the public order on a true basis, it is necessary to forget the facts, to consult only the reason of things, that chain of eternal truths on the practice of which depends the welfare of humanity."⁵⁴

The Cartesian method was consciously and purposely cultivated by the Physiocrats. The article "*De l'utilité des discussions économiques*," which appeared in the fourth volume of *Physiocratie*, for example, quotes favorably from Thomas's famous *éloge* of Descartes. In this work Thomas had explained how Descartes's method of universal doubt had been applied to the social sciences, and he is quoted as concluding: "It would be a great undertaking to apply Cartesian doubt to these objects, to examine them one by

⁵¹ "Quatrième lettre sur la restauration de l'ordre légal," *ibid.* (1768), VI, 11-12.

⁵² Le Mercier, *L'Ordre naturel*, I, 194.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, I, 194-195.

⁵⁴ *Essai sur les maximes et loix fondamentales de la monarchie française, ou Canevas d'un code constitutionnel* (Paris, 1789), xv. Du Pont put the point this bluntly: "Ces principes évidens de la constitution la plus parfaite des sociétés, se manifestent d'eux mêmes à l'homme. Je ne veux pas dire seulement à l'homme instruit & studieux; mais même à l'homme simple, sauvage, sortant des mains de la Nature, borné encore aux premiers, jugemens qui résultent de ses sensations" ("Discours de l'éditeur," *Physiocratie*, I, xix).

one, as he [Descartes] examined all his ideas, and to judge them all only according to the great maxim of *évidence*.”⁵⁵ It is by this method that Le Mercier sought to build the science of physiocracy in his *L'Ordre naturel*. He specifically approves it in these words:

Evidence, says one of our most celebrated Moderns [Descartes], is a clear and distinct discernment of the feelings we have and of all the perceptions which depend on them. Such is the advantage it possesses over error that one who deceives himself does not know the reason of the certitude which results from *évidence*, while whoever possesses *évidence* knows at all times the reason of his certitude and the cause of error.⁵⁶

Quesnay nowhere subscribes to the simple deductive approach to economic questions. It is, indeed, impossible to classify Quesnay under any of the convenient labels of “rationalist,” “empiricist” or the like. He shows a disposition to adhere to no one system or method, but to use whichever one seems best adapted to the problem in hand. Quesnay had originally attracted attention in France for his attacks on the accepted practice of bleeding, and when the *Académie royale de chirurgie* was founded in 1731 he was selected as its secretary. In that rôle he wrote the preface to the first volume of the society’s *Mémoires* in 1743. In this article Quesnay discussed the means of arriving at “truths which can enrich our art,”⁵⁷ means which he concluded were twofold: observation and experience. Each method, he asserted, will conduct the investigator to new knowledge, and each will correct or confirm the findings made by the other method.

Quesnay was known to his contemporaries and to his early biographers as a philosopher rather than as an economist.⁵⁸ Before

⁵⁵ “De l’utilité des discussion économiques,” *Physiocratie*, IV, 46. The author has been unable to determine who wrote this article, but it certainly was not Quesnay, whose works comprise the first two volumes of *Physiocratie*.

⁵⁶ Le Mercier, *op. cit.*, I, 96.

⁵⁷ In Oncken, *op. cit.*, 724–726.

⁵⁸ None of the three *éloges* on Quesnay, from which most biographical information derives, calls him an economist, although they all hail him as the founder of physiocracy. Comte d’Albon asserts: “All the arts and all the sciences were mastered by this great genius. His works have a stamp of erudition and originality perhaps not equalled by any writer before him” (in Oncken, *op. cit.*, 69). M. G. H. de Romance states that Quesnay was a man “who joined to the great intelligence of a statesman the tender sensitivity of a philosopher, an enemy of all partisanship, above all sects, choosing for each article from among the scattered readings of universal reason, one whose moderation had made him an eclectic” (in *ibid.*, 112).

writing on economics he had earned a name for himself in France and abroad for treating such subjects as the immortality of the soul, the freedom of the will, the origin of ideas and that problem so perplexing to his generation, the relation of the soul and the body. In these writings Quesnay showed strong independence of mind and a refusal to accept any of the current systems of thought. To the annoyance of Diderot and the encyclopedists, he insisted on the freedom of the will and the immortality of the soul. His analysis of both these subjects shows knowledge of and an affinity for the decadent Aristotelianism still current in France.⁵⁹

Quesnay certainly was not a Cartesian. In his article *Évidence*, written for the *Encyclopédie*, Quesnay makes a direct attack on Descartes's hypothesis of innate ideas; he also attacks the *je pense, donc je suis* principle, which he labels *égoïsme métaphysique*.⁶⁰ At the same time, he denounces scholastic logic as barren reasoning. In his *Droit naturel* he specifically rejects the social contract theories of both Hobbes and Rousseau. In his *Essai physique sur l'économie animale* he attacks Malebranche's famous theory of occasionalism, which tried to solve the problem bequeathed to philosophers by Descartes when he separated the body from the soul. In the same essay he criticized Locke's explanation of the origin of ideas for leaving the mind too passive a receptacle of sense impressions. Quesnay's medical and philosophical writings reveal a mind more inclined to inductive than to deductive reasoning, one ready to check theory by observation and experiment, but a mind, nonetheless, which is not hostile to deductive, analytic reasoning when such a method seems appropriate to the subject under consideration.

His treatment of economic subjects shows no radical departure in methodology from that of his previous studies. Quesnay, as a matter of fact, implicitly divides the subject-matter of physiocracy into a normative branch on the one hand and a scientific one on the other. His *Droit naturel* and his *Despotisme de la Chine*, for example, treat of things as they should be and as Quesnay thinks they could be if man would conduct himself intelligently in accordance

⁵⁹ Aristotelianism remained the "official" philosophy at the Sorbonne until the famous De Prades affair of 1752. At that time the Cartesian theory of innate ideas was officially adopted to replace the *nihil in intellectu nisi in sensu* theory on the origin of ideas. There is good reason for believing that Cartesianism was subscribed to by most of the younger philosophers before 1750, but it had not been officially adopted by the university.

⁶⁰ "Évidence," in Oncken, *op. cit.*, 777.

with the laws of nature.⁶¹ This is *a priori* reasoning from what Quesnay takes as first principles, but not of the rigid type that proceeds irrespective of facts. "Reason alone," he observes, "is not sufficient to conduct men here to a knowledge of the natural order; it is necessary that he acquire by reason the knowledge which is so necessary to him."⁶² In these normative studies Quesnay constantly backs up his conclusions with the facts of observation and experience.

His articles on the scientific aspects of economics reveal a completely different approach. He begins his article *Fermiers* for the *Encyclopédie* by telling the reader that "if you consider agriculture in France only under its general aspects you can form only a few vague and imperfect ideas."⁶³ Therefore, he advises, "consult the cultivators themselves."⁶⁴ The study then proceeds to inquire how farming is carried on in various parts of France, whether horses or oxen are used, what the size of the farm is, what kind of feed must be used, and what, consequently, the relation of output is to expenses under the various methods of farming. It is a comparative, statistical study throughout. The same is true of his article *Grains*, where he makes a comparative study of *grande culture* and *petite culture* and comes to the conclusion that the former is more economical. In his article *Du commerce* he insists in almost nominalistic fashion: "We should not reason against the facts; the facts are realities. But a generic term like the word *commerce*, which brings together a multitude of different realities, is not itself a reality."⁶⁵

Quesnay also made use of the "geometric," hypothetical method of argument. His first economic problem of this kind is given in the August, 1766, number of the *Journal de l'agriculture, du commerce et des finances*. Here he proceeds in Euclidian fashion, stating the problem (does an increase of prices help a nation more

⁶¹ The laws of nature, Quesnay insists in several places, are either physical or moral. The former govern the physical order of the universe—rainfall, growth and decay, the turn of the seasons and such; the latter regulate "every human action of the moral order." Quesnay insists that man is intelligent and free, "although sometimes he is neither the one nor the other." He is therefore free to obey the moral natural law, but as a physical being he has no freedom about obeying the physical natural law. Either he eats or he starves.

⁶² "Le droit naturel," *Physiocratie*, I, 28.

⁶³ "Fermiers," in Oncken, *op. cit.*, 159.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 160. ⁶⁵ In Oncken, *op. cit.*, 459.

than it hurts it?), giving the assumptions, answering the objections and stating the solution. But, Quesnay states in his prefatory note, "this problem is purely hypothetical."⁶⁶

V

Quesnay did not subscribe to the easy rationalistic treatment of social problems, as did his disciples. He believed in the existence of an objective order and in man's ability to comprehend that order. It is not for the natural order to correspond to man's language, he tells his reader, but for language and thought to correspond to the natural order.⁶⁷ Here he steers clear of the subjectivism found in both Descartes and Locke. He refuses, however, to go to the other extreme of denying that man can validly arrive at general laws by the inductive method. He refuses to hold that knowledge consists only of "facts." He seems to have borrowed from all his predecessors without subscribing completely to the system of any of them. He was friendly for a time with the encyclopedists, but he never agreed with Diderot in the latter's attack on the freedom of the will or in his complete sensationalism.⁶⁸ He took much from Locke, but he did not hesitate to criticize the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. He held many definitions that he could have obtained, directly or indirectly, only from the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition.⁶⁹

Further study of the Physiocrats, it would therefore seem, should proceed on the understanding that they agreed in wanting

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 494. Quesnay's prefatory note appeared only in the first edition of this work. Du Pont omitted it from his collection, apparently because he did not think it important. This omission is a further indication of the justice of Oncken's observation that Quesnay's followers did not fully understand their master's writing.

⁶⁷ "Sur les travaux des artisans," in *ibid.*, 528.

⁶⁸ Because of his court position, Quesnay wrote for the *Encyclopédie* under a pseudonym. After the work was suppressed, he contributed no more articles. But his *Fonctions de l'âme* was submitted and should have appeared before his *Grains*. It was not printed, however, and a comparison of what Quesnay held on these questions of the soul with Diderot's beliefs makes us conclude, in the absence of any positive information, that Diderot did not like the article and was unwilling to print it. He did take *Évidence* because it was anti-Cartesian; and *Fermiers* and *Grains* were inductive studies which Diderot would easily approve.

⁶⁹ Quesnay's definitions of price, exchange, value and commerce, his antipathy for *négociants* and his preference for agriculture, are all strikingly similar to the ideas of medieval scholastics, as Beer so well shows. But it is rash to conclude, as Beer does, that Quesnay read St. Thomas.

to set up a science of physiocracy, which was to include economics as one of its principal branches—along with politics and sociology and ethics. It would be a much broader science, they agreed, than the science of wealth, which Du Pont contemptuously called *un recueil de calculs*.⁷⁰ But Quesnay held a different view from his disciples on the methodology of this study and on cardinal points of doctrine. It is not correct to hold, as has been done in the past, that the Physiocrats formed a sect and that in their works “all follow implicitly, and without any sensible variation, the doctrine of Mr. Quesnai.”⁷¹

Grimm and Diderot sum up the differences between Quesnay and his outstanding disciple, Le Mercier de la Rivière, as seen by encyclopedist eyes. Grimm says of Quesnay that “he is not only naturally obscure, he is even systematically obscure and he pretends that truth should never be stated clearly.”⁷² Again: “The old Quesnay is a decided cynic.”⁷³ Diderot is lyrical in his praise of Le Mercier. To his friend Falconnet he writes: “I have known M. de la Rivière; he is a good, wise and simple man; he is a man of uncommon merit.”⁷⁴ Again he tells Falconnet that “it is he [Le Mercier] who has discovered the secret, the true secret, the eternal and immutable secret of the security, the duration and the welfare of empires. It is he who will offer us solace for the death of Montesquieu.”⁷⁵ Finally: “I admire the certitude and the fertility of his principles, the easy manner in which he solves the gravest difficulties, and the simplicity with which he resolves objections. Everything is written in his book, but it is there for those who know how to read.”⁷⁶ Quesnay was not *à la mode* to men of the Enlightenment; his disciples, especially Le Mercier, were.

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⁷⁰ In Daire, *op. cit.*, 396.

⁷¹ This is the statement of Adam Smith, *op. cit.*, II, 173, with which there is general agreement.

⁷² Grimm, *op. cit.*, Pt. I, vol. II, 481.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 482.

⁷⁴ Letter of May, 1768, in *Oeuvres complètes de Diderot* (Paris, 1875), XVIII, 259.

⁷⁵ Letter of July, 1767, in *ibid.*, XVIII, 236.

⁷⁶ Letter of September, 1768, in *ibid.*, XVIII, 273.